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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BERLIN 000686

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GM](#)
SUBJECT: CAN CHAIRMAN BECK RALLY AN UNRULY SPD?

REF: A. BERLIN 531

[1](#)B. BERLIN 265

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Jeffrey Rathke for Reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The Social Democratic Party (SPD) has continued in recent weeks to publicly show a lack of unity on key issues. They have disagreed on whether German leaders should meet with the Dalai Lama, whether the SPD should support Horst Koehler's (as yet unannounced) candidacy for another term as Germany's president, whether to support a raise for parliamentarians, and over tax policy. In each case, the splits in the party occur along different lines, involving different factions. At the May 19 SPD Party Executive Board meeting, which brought together the party's small circle of top leaders, Beck responded by deferring the decision regarding support for Koehler's candidacy until after Koehler decides whether to run for reelection, which he will likely announce on May 22. SPD General Secretary Hubertus Heil urged party members to use more discretion in their public statements, adding that the party has a "deficit in public discipline." Beck will likely use the party's May 31 Nuremberg Future Conference 2008 as an opportunity to attempt to reassert himself as the SPD's unifying force. End summary.

Beck Blindsided

[1](#)2. (U) Beck was caught off-guard and offered some choice words regarding Development Minister Heidemarie Wiecek-Zeul's (SPD) May 19 meeting in Berlin with the Dalai Lama. Beck was apparently not informed in advance about Wiecek-Zeul's planned meeting with the Dalai Lama and reacted angrily, reportedly complaining that this &sh** could not be undone and "I assume such uncoordinated action on such a difficult question will not be repeated." Wiecek-Zeul's decision to meet with the Dalai Lama was also in stark opposition to the refusal by Vice Chancellor and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), who argued that meeting with the Dalai Lama would damage Germany's relationship with China. In supporting the Dalai Lama on human rights, Wiecek-Zeul has run afoul of Steinmeier's attempt to cast his China policy as more pragmatic than that of the Chancellery.

SPD Also Divided on Koehler and Taxes

[1](#)3. (C) Regarding the question of a possible second term for President Koehler, several SPD parliamentarians have urged that the party should instead support an SPD candidate, suggesting the possibility of university president Gesine

Schwan. Beck has said that his party would wait until Koehler publicly announces whether he will run again -- likely by the end of May -- before announcing a decision. In the meantime, Schwan has been profiled in the press, including a report on her May 20 meeting with Lothar Bisky, Co-Chair of the controversial Left Party. (Comment: If the SPD were to put forward Schwan as their presidential candidate, her meeting with Bisky could prove embarrassing given the recent political tempest caused by Beck's proposal to allow the SPD's lead candidate in Hesse to be elected as minister president with the support of the Left Party. End comment.)

¶4. (SBU) On tax cuts, Beck will soon unveil the SPD's proposal to reduce the tax burden on the middle class, but Finance Minister Peer Steinbrueck (SPD) has expressed concern that the measures would threaten his goal of a balanced budget by 2011. Beck's public announcement that the SPD tax proposal would be unveiled at the end of May was apparently a surprise to Steinbrueck. Media coverage depicted the SPD policy as uncoordinated.

¶5. (C) Stefan Ramge, political advisor at SPD party headquarters, told Embassy Berlin that the party is concerned about the public rifts. "We are a party whose members have very diverse opinions and who have excellent contacts in the press." He added that "we are not always on the same page," but that Beck will seek to bring unity and party discipline at his keynote speech at the upcoming May 31 Nuremberg Future Conference 2008, which will be stage-managed to buttress Beck's role and where he will delineate the party line on key domestic issues likely stressing that the party should speak with a single voice.

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Comment

¶6. (C) If every problem is an opportunity, the SPD perhaps is suffering from an overabundance of opportunity. These latest divisions raise the question of whether Beck will be able to finally rein in the party and rally it behind him, or whether the SPD will continue to lose it discipline and unity. The SPD has long been divided on key issues such as the Agenda 2010 reforms and whether to engage with the Left Party. What is clear is that Beck continues to experience mixed results in his attempts to control the party. To a significant extent, Beck himself has unintentionally fostered divisions on other issues, such as his uncoordinated support to the attempt to build a new Hesse state government with the support of the Left Party, and more recently, his announcement of a new tax policy. The May 31 SPD Future Conference 2008, featuring a keynote speech by Beck, will be a major opportunity for the party chairman to attempt to repair the party's latest fissures and brandish a new reputation as a unifying force. End comment.

TIMKEN JR